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STATUS REPORT ON THE SIENA GROUP ON SOCIAL STATISTICS

Prepared by Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway and ISTAT

BACKGROUND

1. The hopes and expectations that accompanied the end of the cold war, the steps taken by the developing world towards political democracy and market economies, and the growing concerns facing industrialised societies, are putting increasing pressures on the statistical community to do more work and better work in the crucial field of social statistics.

2. There is a need to follow and monitor current problems of risking unemployment and increasing poverty. There is, as well, a need to develop links between social and economic statistics in order to give a broader picture of social trends.

3. In October 1993, the Italian Instituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT) organised a Seminar on National Accounts and Social Statistics in Siena, in memory of Sir Richard Stone, which brought together social researchers and statisticians from many countries. At the end of the Seminar, it was suggested to launch an initiative leading to the creation of a "Voorburg" type working group on social statistics. A first meeting of the "Siena group" is being organised by Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway and ISTAT in Stockholm in June 1994.

PROBLEMS AND PRIORITIES

4. During the last decades a lot of work has been done in the field of social statistics. The UN tried to develop a System of Social and Demographic Statistics corresponding to the System of National Accounts for economic statistics. The OECD developed a System of Social Indicators to be used for monitoring social and welfare development. These efforts have met with limited success, one reason being that it is both difficult and resource-intensive to develop a system covering all the dimensions of social development.

5. Different countries produce statistics dealing with selected aspects of social development. Examples are population censuses, labour force studies, working environment statistics, family budget studies, health statistics, income statistics, etc. Even if some countries have developed Systems of Social Indicators offering a more comprehensive picture, social statistics on the whole give a poorly coordinated and often disharmonious description of societal development.

6. Recently, Eurostat has started work on new social statistics in the European Union, where the aim is to create better harmonization and improve comparability. The major obstacles to progress in the field are the following:

(1) the difficulty of developing conceptual frameworks capable of doing justice to the multidimensional nature of social phenomena;

(2) the lack of user-friendly indicators, particularly outcome-oriented ones, capable of guiding policy choices and the allocation of public resources;

(3) the separation of different domains of social statistics (education, labour, income distribution, family patterns, crime, etc.), often reflecting strictly separated policy compartments, leading to the neglect of feedback and lack of interdependence;

(4) the insufficient harmonization of concepts, norms and methods, causing poor comparability of analysis between countries and sectors.

OBJECTIVES AND PROGRAMME OF WORK

7. The field of social accounting and social statistics is vast and differentiated. Many players are involved in different domains at the national and international levels. It is essential therefore to avoid duplication and overlapping and to focus the programme of work on a few, well-defined topics, to which major attention should be given.

8. Tentatively, three themes have been selected:

(1) The development of conceptual frameworks specifying linkages and sequences. The socio-economic linkage is of utmost relevance; but also the link between society and the environment. Social accounting matrices, satellite accounts, and comprehensive systems of social statistic have to be analysed in order to derive common concepts, definitions, classifications and methods. An effort has to be made to broaden the operational frameworks currently used in economic and social statistics, permitting the analysis of interdependence and supporting greater coherence in policy making across different specific areas of intervention.

(2) The use of micro data for micro modelling and micro simulation of policy measures. The integration of survey and administrative data and the development of panel surveys allow unprecedented possibilities for understanding how society works and reacts to changes in policy and the environment.

(3) The construction and use of policy-relevant and user-friendly indicators, capable of governing the policy discussion and monitoring social patterns. Indicators are particularly needed in relation to the on-going reform of social protection systems with the aim of improving the cost-efficiency and effectiveness of those systems. The crucial, and most difficult task here is to define "outcome indicators", which involves complex conceptual and measurement issues.

9. The group will have to review the state of the art on these topics, revisit the agenda of the relevant players and promote the bridging of existing gaps.It is intended to start the development of linkages by looking at the different domains in pairs, for instance education and the labour market working conditions and socio-economic group, health and poverty, housing and migration, family patterns and crime, etc. A more familiar approach is to look at specific target groups in a multidisciplinary approach and across a broad spectrum of policy domains. A good part of the June 1994 Stockholm Seminar will be devoted to the definition of the future programme of work of the Siena Group, including the identification of priority items.

THE OPERATIVE STRUCTURE

10. The group will be composed of a small number or statisticians, experts in the field of social statistics and accounting. They will be designated not for their affiliation but for their expertise, vision and ability to commit resources. The group will also benefit from the contribution of academic experts, representatives of relevant international organisations and government departments. Given the variety of themes, it is likely that the composition of participants will change from time to time, leaving to a core of official statisticians the responsibility for ensuring continuity of results.

11. The organisation will be flexible, informal and non-bureaucratic. The activities are to be self-financed and all participants will be required to provide substantive contributions to the work programme. The group will meet about once a year, and aim at publishing the main results of its work.

STOCKHOLM SEMINAR

12. Statistics Sweden, Statistics Norway and ISTAT have decided to jointly organise a first meeting on Social Statistics in Stockholm from 6-7 June 1994. At this meeting the use of social indicators, social accounting and micro studies in social reporting and social policy analysis will be discussed with a view to focusing the programme of work of the Siena Group.

13. With combined contributions from different fields of statistics it is intended to give a more comprehensive picture of the development and distribution of welfare than is possible today. At the end of the seminar a discussion of priorities will take place. Questions will be raised about the possibility of creating better links between the different approaches. Harmonization will be discussed as well as the possibilities to create a new common survey using social indicators. We are in a situation where choices have to be made and priority given to a limited number of studies and variables. Which of these paths are we to choose?